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ABSTRACT

Social events are constructed in two senses. First, each participant's understanding of the event is an active construction arising from his or her current level of understanding and from information provided in the environment. Second, events are social interactions that are negotiated between participants. Both of these senses of construction can be considered as constraints that channel children's action and support the development of their social understanding. This paper examines these two senses of construction as they apply to children's interaction with teachers and peers in a commonly occurring preschool event--snacktime. Observations of 18 children 31 to 57 months of age and their teachers suggest that snacktime is not a tightly constructed, pre-planned event for either the teachers or the children. Rather, both continually adjust their interaction as others and circumstances dictate. This social process constitutes a matrix of contextual constraints which are continually and actively constructed by the participants. These social constraints are interpreted, generalized, and internalized. Once internalized, such knowledge organizes future actions and negotiations. (RH)

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Children's Construction of Conventional Procedures with Teachers and Peers

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Children's Construction of Conventional Procedures with Teachers and Peers

In order to appreciate the complexity of the child's social world, consider the following generalized description of an event that occurs in most preschools -- snacktime:

In the preschool observed, snacktime occurred each day after children had been in school for about an hour and a half. Snacktime followed a period of free play and children were required to put away the toys used in play before taking a seat at the snack table. Children chose their own seats in chairs at low tables of appropriate height for children of this age. At the beginning of snacktime a pitcher of water and a pitcher of juice were placed on the table. The pitcher containing juice was marked with a piece of red tape; the water pitcher was not marked. Children were provided with paper cups for their drink and with napkins that were used both for wiping faces and hands and as plates for food. Usually cups and napkins were distributed by children taking one of the items and passing the rest on to another child who in turn took an item and passed it on to the next child. Pitchers of drink were poured by each child and the pitcher passed on to other waiting children. Verbal requests

for food, drink, napkins and cups were to be accompanied by the use of the word, "please." The food available for snack varied from day to day. It included a variety of crackers and fruits and occasionally baked goods such as muffins, pancakes or banana bread either made by the children at school or brought by a parent and child from home to share with the group. Sometimes items made by the children at school were consumed on the same day they were prepared; at other times the items were saved for snack on a subsequent day. Like cups and napkins, food items also were usually distributed by the children. While "seconds" on drink were almost always allowed, additional helpings of food were not always permissible. Children ate almost all foods using their fingers. However, eating utensils were observed twice, once when children spread peanut butter on bananas using a communal knife and once when when children ate hot apple crisp with individual spoons. Occasionally a metal bowl was put on the table to be used to discard unwanted or inedible pieces of food such as orange rinds, seeds and muffin papers. Children were responsible for cleaning up after themselves by discarding used cups and napkins in a large trash can on one side of the room. After snacktime children were

encouraged to use the bathroom. Snacktime was usually followed by either outside play or circle time.

Obviously, there is a lot going on in this everyday event. Through many hours of watching children at snacktime and viewing and re-viewing videotapes of this event, I have been repeatedly struck by the complexity of this apparently mundane event. It is so complex in fact, that I continue to be amazed at how quickly and how well children apparently are able to cut through the complexity in order to learn just what are the social rules and conventional procedures of this and other social interactions.

My approach to this question of how children come to understand the relatively invariant conventional procedures of social interactions has been to focus on the role that others play in facilitating this understanding. This approach seems to me to be intuitively reasonable. After all, children do not learn to participate in social interactions by themselves, but rather, by definition, within a social context. In the preschool, this social context includes teachers and peers.

It should be noted that considering context in child development need not lead to a situationism which assumes that each social encounter is composed of a

unique constellation of social and individual influences. Individuals bring to social interactions both knowledge of past experiences and preferred patterns of interaction. Social interactions occur within physically structured and socially organized environments which exhibit similarity across situations. Social events reflect underlying functional similarity across instances of social exchanges. Thus, consideration of context permits description, understanding and prediction of development without the need for a geometrically progressing specification of influences required by an extreme situationalism. However, such a contextualism does not aim to predict the specific outcome of particular developmental paths. Rather, it explicity recognizes that development, while dependent on social influences, is not determined by these social influences.[1]

The way I have begun to make sense of the apparent ease with which children learn social conventions is to think in terms of complementary processes in social interaction and capabilities in children that support

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1. Thus the relationship between developing child and social environment has be described as one of "independent dependence" (Valsiner, 1987; Winegar, Valsiner & Renninger, 1987).

the child's developing understanding of social events. Specifically, I (and others, Winegar & Renninger, 1985; Winegar, in press; Valsiner, 1984; 1987) have claimed that social partners and social situations provide constraints on action that channel children toward socially appropriate performance in, and understanding of their cultural environment. Constraints are defined as boundary conditions within which some perceptions, representations and actions of the child are promoted and others are discouraged. At least as importantly, children also bring to social events a sensitivity to constraints on perception, representation and action placed by social others and rely on such social constraining to highlight relevant aspects of the social exchange. It is through these complementary processes that children come to understand their social world.

The following episode from snacktime illustrates social constraining of children's action as utilized by adults; it also suggests that such constraints can be internalized and eventually guide children's actions in the absence of others.

On the first day of school, the teacher instructed the children in pouring pitchers of drink in the following manner: Teacher holds up two pitchers of

liquid and says, "Today we have apple juice and water. This pitcher has apple juice and the pitcher with the red mark has water." Teacher asks a child which he would like to drink. The teacher then sets the appropriate pitcher next to the child's right hand. She then says, "Okay, hold the pitcher in one hand and your cup in the other." Teacher helps child by guiding his hands with hers, then says, "That's good."

On the sixth day the pouring of drinks goes as follows: Teacher gets two pitchers of liquid and, holding up one of them, says, "Who remembers what is in the pitcher that has the red mark on it?" Holds up pitcher with red mark and repeats, "What's in this one?" After a pause, several children respond, "Water!" Teacher replies, "Water! And we have orange juice. We have orange juice today." Pitchers are passed around to the children. Each, in turn, pours his or her own drink holding the pitcher in one hand and the cup in the other. The teacher, who is passing out grapes to each child, watches the children pour and occasionally expedites the passing of the pitchers. On occasion she comments on the pouring, for example asking a child, " Can you pour your juice by yourself?", but at no time does she provide assistance for the act of pouring. Later in snacktime, a child

asks, "Can you help me pour?" The teacher stands behind the child, watching the child and lightly guiding the child's hands while the child pours the liquid. When completed, the teacher says, "You did a very nice job."

On the eighth day of school, three children are sitting at the snack table prior to the start of snacktime. Though pitchers of drink and cups are on the table, no teacher is present. In turn, the children each pour their own juice; each holds the pitcher in the right hand and steadies the cup with the left. The pouring is accomplished without incident and before the teacher returns.

However, children's understanding of the social world is not a direct mapping of the constraints on action provided by others. Just as children's level of cognitive development organizes their exploratory manipulation of objects, their level of social understanding organizes their choice of action during social encounters and limits the information they can extract from exchanges with social partners. Further, the constraints of others do not reflect rigid rules and goals held together by temporal and causal structure. Rather, the constraints of others are active negotiations between participants that vary as

circumstances and others dictate.

Thus, social events are constructed in two senses. First, participants' understanding of the event is an active construction arising from the participants' current levels of understanding and information provided by the environment. Participants do not simply take in information as offered by the physical and social environment, but rather *construct* meaning out of both this information and their understanding gained from previous experience. In this sense, understanding of events is an *intra*-individual co-construction of information in the world and knowledge/value of the participants. It is this intra-individual sense of co-construction which is usually discussed in most presentations of a co-constructive metatheory (e.g., Wozniak, 1983; 1986).

However, there is a second sense in which understanding may be considered to be constructed. Much like active integration of current level of understanding and information in the environment gives rise to co-constructed knowledge, interaction between individuals gives rise to co-constructed understanding. Joint action of individuals objectifies their knowledge through its expression in language and action. When individuals express their understanding

through their language or action, the meaning of these expressions, and hence the social value of the knowledge underlying such expressions, is derived from the relation of one individual's actions to the actions of others. Individuals' actions do not have meaning in isolation; actions acquire meaning in their relation to complementary re-actions of others. Actions of individuals in and of themselves do not constitute social events; events are social interactions that are negotiated and interpreted between participants. Participants do not follow pre-established "scripts" for performance, but rather they jointly *construct* the organization and social meaning of the activity. In this sense, social procedures, conventions and events are *inter*-individual co-constructions of social organization. It is this inter-individual sense of co-construction is often refered to as intersubjectivity (e.g., Newson & Newson, 1975; Rommetveit, 1979; Trevarthen, 1979; Trevarthen & Hubley, 1978) and is beginning to be expressed in discussions of social construct*ion*ism (e.g., Gergen, 1985; in press).

Several observations of teachers' and children's interaction during snacktime suggest that the approach outlined above is a meaningful and heuristic

description of the nature of their understanding. Let me illustrate the two senses of co-construction and the relationship between them with two specific examples from snacktime.

Eighteen children (31 to 57 months) and their teachers were observed interacting as a group during the preschool event of "snacktime". Seventeen of the children had not attended preschool previously. One child had attended the same preschool the previous year although with different teachers. Teacher direction and child performance during this event were observed and recorded daily for the first three weeks of school, twice a week for the remainder of the year, and again daily for the week immediately after Christmas break. The observations reported here are from the first three weeks of the new school year.

Episode 1: Cracker Passing

At the beginning of snacktime as children are sitting down, one child is passing cups to other children by taking one cup at a time off a stack and handing each cup to another child. The teacher says, "Can you pass the cups around so that everyone has one? Thanks."

About a minute later, the teacher while helping one child pour juice, says to a different child, "How

'bout if you start the crackers? Can you take one and pass it to everyone? Can you pass the basket around..."

The child responds by taking packages of crackers out of the basket and passing packages of crackers to each child rather than passing the basket of crackers.

The teacher looks up and adds, "...or pass the packs?"

In this example, the child passing the crackers understands the teacher's instructions as requiring the passing of individual packages of crackers. This understanding may have arisen because of the child's observation of a previous passing episode or because of the teacher's phrasing of the directions (or both). In either case, the child's action of passing crackers reflects both her previous understanding and the information provided in the immediate setting. Further, the procedure for passing crackers is negotiated between child and teacher. This can be seen in the teacher's adjustment of her verbal instructions to include the passing method of the child.

Another episode from the first few day of school further illustrates both the intra- and inter-individual sense of co-construction.

Episode 2: Grape Counting

Teacher passes basket of grapes to each child instructing and helping each to count three grapes. After all children have gotten their grapes the teacher notices that one child does not have enough. The teacher instructs the child to take an additional grape by saying, "I think you need to have another one. You only have two. Can you take another one?"

Child takes one more grape and then another and another. Teacher notices. "Can you count three? How many do you have there?"

Child (who has four grapes) counts, "One, two, three, four, five."

Teacher says, "I think you have four. Can you put one back in the basket?"

Child pauses, then shakes head, "no."

Teacher shakes head in imitation of child and then says, "Can you give everyone another grape so they can all have four?"

In this episode the influence of the child's current level of cognitive ability on one aspect of the procedures of snacktime is again illustrated. The child seems to understand that part of what you sometimes do at snacktime is to count out items, often food or cups, and so readily engages in that activity. However, since the child is not yet proficient at

counting, the desired end of this counting procedure from the teacher's point of view (probably to have the children practice counting and to ensure that all children get an equal portion of food) does not appear to be understood. The child's shaking her head "no" is as much an indication that she doesn't understand the counting procedure (and therefore how many grapes she has or is supposed to have) as it is a refusal to comply with the teacher's instructions.

In this episode we also see the inter-individual co-construction of social conventions during snacktime. Here, the teacher alters her previously established limit of three grapes per child in response to the child's reluctance to return an extra grape to the basket. While in the cracker-passing episode the teacher adjusts her instructions to include the child's method of passing, in this grape-counting episode the teacher adjusts her previously established limit of three grapes to include the number of grapes the child has taken. Further, this adjustment in limit, though made in response to a single child's action, is applied to all children at the table. So the child is instructed to, "...give everyone another grape so they can all have four."

Thus, the procedures and conventions of snacktime

are co-constructed both intra- and inter-individually. Children's (and teacher's) understanding of snacktime as a social event arises from their general level of understanding, previous experience in this and similar events, and information provided by the physical and social environment in which the event occurs. Children's and teacher's participation in snacktime involves not only the completion of the actions of the event, but also the negotiation of procedures and conventions as applied both to immediate experience and to future occasions.

With these examples in mind, let us return to the process by which children come to understand events generally, and the conventional procedures of snacktime specifically. Social interaction during an event provides a forum in which (1) through their language and action social others make explicit their knowledge of the conventional procedures of the event, and (2) through their language and action children express their knowledge of conventional procedures. The expression of knowledge by either participant reflects intra-individual co-construction of knowledge, while the *joint* expression of knowledge by both participants reflects inter-individual co-construction of understanding. Thus, understanding of social events is

represented as a process of active co-construction both within and between individuals. In this way, Vygotsky's (1978) claim that "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level" (p. 57) is applied to the development of children's understanding of their social world. Further, both aspects of the dialectical relationship between social and individual are explicitly recognized and the nature of social understanding is brought full circle. This circle is completed with the recognition that understanding expressed on the social level reflects knowledge on the individual level, knowledge which in turn was first apparent in social interaction.

In conclusion let me briefly restate the claims of this paper. Negotiation in social interaction constitutes a matrix of contextual constraints. These social constraints are interpreted, generalized and internalized. Once internalized, such knowledge organizes future actions and negotiations. The implication of such an approach is that if we want to know what children understand about conventional procedures and how this knowledge develops, one fruitful place to look is at the social interactions out of which their understanding emerges.

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